

MDE Smart Commuter Team

"In May 2008, the Michigan Department of Education's Wellness Team encouraged colleagues to join the 2008 Smart Commute Challenge, sponsored by the Mid Michigan Environmental Action Council (Mid-MEAC). This year's challenge kicked off during National Bicycle to Work Week, which is promoted by the League of American Bicyclists, including the Michigan chapter, and was May 12-16. Although there was no competition in this event, it is a reminder that bicycling is a great activity, and even if you cannot bicycle all the way to work regularly, there are many other options to save money, cut down on costs of driving, and stay in shape.

The Smart Commute Challenge began May 19th and continued through May 31st, which included the Memorial Day holiday weekend. The competition invited companies (or State departments) to compete in different employee-size categories, encouraging employees to use walking, bicycling, carpooling, bus, vanpool, and telecommuting rather than driving alone. For the Mid-Michigan area, there were not as many participants as in the past, but those who did join the Department of Education Team were enthusiastic, even though there were no incentives (like 'smart commuter' t-shirts or other prizes) for joining.

Regionally, according to the Mid-MEAC, a total of 1,159 trips were logged in this year's challenge. There were 17 members of the MDE Team, including five from the Department of Labor and Economic Growth (DLEG) who were warmly welcomed. As in 2006 and 2007, the MDE Team was organized by Jane Reagan, and she reports that the Team walked, motorcycled, bussed, bicycled and car pooled to work during the Challenge, totaling 136 total smart commuter-days, which is how the competition counts activity.

Reagan specifically mentioned the Team Members who car-pool. "Not only were they all consistently 'scoring' as smart commuters each day, but they also do so all year long, saving the environment and lots of money too during the rest of the year!!", she said.

One of the MDE Smart Commuters, Marsha, said, "Car pooling and public transportation are options that are very significant factors as cumulative stress reducers. Among my co-workers, five participated in Smart Commute, and NONE of those five had to concentrate on the road all the way to work and home at night. They have the comradery of the car pool, share costs and are helping the environment. The other ten co-workers who did NOT participate, had to concentrate on the road during their commutes. One could make a solid case that if these circumstances were multiplied, one of the results would be to help reduce chronic disease from daily stress from driving, and research shows there are clear associations between the two."

Reagan adds, "There were many members of the MDE Team who also went the 'extra mile' and tried hard to change their habits of driving to work alone. Some drove to the bus stop and then took the bus the rest of the way. Others wanted to bike to work, but because their route included narrow back county roads, they decided to drive, bus or bicycle for a portion of their regular commute. Those individuals' attempts to change are also noteworthy. Each person's efforts made a difference," Reagan said.

For her part, Reagan has loved bicycling since she was a child, when she and her siblings biked a mile to school in their small city, weather permitting. All other days they walked. Since 1982, she has been a member of the Tri County Bicycle Association, the largest bicycling club in the State of Michigan. It serves the Ingham, Clinton and Eaton counties and organizes one of the most popular 5-day bicycling tours in the country-the DALMAC-Dick Allen Lansing to Mackinac Bridge ride, over each Labor Day weekend. As the name of the tour implies, the riders begin in East Lansing and four or five days later are in Mackinac City. The TCBA cuts off registration at about 1700 participants each year, and it is so well run and such a great deal, it fills up within a few weeks after the registrations are released each March. Reagan has ridden in 21 DALMAC trips, choosing to ride the five-day route with friends who call themselves "Team Lollygag", because they stop along the way at lakes and parks for the entire five day tour!

Reagan has been a member of the MDE Wellness Action Team since 2002 and enjoys the group's efforts to inform colleagues about healthy eating, playing and working. She believes the efforts to get healthy or stay healthy do require that: requiring effort. With severe budget cuts, workloads increasing each year and so many retirements, the stress levels at the office can be offset by physical activity and eating nutritious food. She also added that "People who have a healthy outlook are simply more fun to work with, and maybe they are more productive too!"

Submitted by Janet Reagan, Michigan Department of Education